Alleviating anxieties: listening to student voices through their enablers

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Content

• University student anxieties
• Issues involved
• Inclusivity projects at PU
• The student voice via their enablers
Student anxieties

• The number of university students with a serious mental illness has risen significantly over the past few years – 1 in 4 adults experience a mental health problem in any one year (e.g. Andrews and Wilding, 2004)

• A systematic review of literature that addressed emotional and or mental health problems of university students worldwide identified 572 papers (Storrie et al., 2010)
Key issues

The authors identified the key issues to include:

• types of problems experienced by students
• how staff dealt with these students
• barriers to seeking help
• tools that facilitated help-seeking, and
• epidemiological trends in the university student population
Plymouth University

• Students have anxieties in many arenas, e.g. academic, personal, financial.
• From mild to more severe (assessed) mental health difficulties
• Services available to students include:
  – Counselling services
  – Disability Assist for assessed mental health difficulties
Acknowledging the need for inclusivity

- A portfolio of projects across the university on inclusive teaching, learning and assessment
- Outcomes and deliverables include a one-stop web resource containing video-clips from staff and students
- [https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/teaching-and-learning/inclusivity](https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/teaching-and-learning/inclusivity)
This project: untapped knowledge

• Like all students, those with assessed needs vary in their ability to vocalise their experiences and concerns whilst at university.

• The aim of an OFFA-funded project entitled ‘Untapped Knowledge: learning from student enablers’ was to give voice to these students through learning from their enablers, or non-medical helpers.
Untapped knowledge project

• A qualitative research project examining the untapped knowledge that Non-Medical Helpers (NMHs) have developed.

• Although student voices are represented in the literature (e.g. Fuller et al., 2004), those of NMHs are rarely heard.

• Their insight provided authentic information; being more detached than students, they are more objective.
Project objectives

• To identify challenges and examples of good practice experienced by NMHs and their students.
• To develop simple ‘good practice’ guides for staff.
• To make the material palatable and useful rather than too rigorous and demanding.
Project methods

• Qualitative data were collected from NMHs via online survey
• Two focus groups held with NMHs to explore themes identified
• Responses and transcripts analysed using Excel and NVivo
• Draft ‘Short Guides for Busy Academics’ produced on two sample themes
• Two content development workshops run with NMHs and academics to help develop the guides
• Finalising the guides in discussion with Disability Assist
Findings: key themes

Findings from survey and focus groups highlighted key themes:

• anxiety as an over-arching issue irrespective of the condition
• the desire for discretion
• lack of quiet space
• difficulties with timetabling, group work, documentation, and communication
One lecturer I had was explaining something to the new cohort of 1\textsuperscript{st} years, my student was at her 3\textsuperscript{rd} attempt at the first year. The lecturer pointed her out in front of everyone to say, well, you know all this already, don’t you?
Quiet space

Finding a workspace [is difficult] where a student is comfortable and can focus on work rather than anxiety triggered by the environment; students tend to feel watched over or that their conversation is being listened to.
Timetabling changes

Module timetable given in the handbooks differs from the actual timetable. Changes are poorly communicated and cause a lot of anxiety and stress.
Peer interactions/group work

Tutorials can also be difficult as they tend to be in groups of 3 or 4 and are specifically set out to be constructively critical but again with an anxious student this can be another difficult situation as they can feel they are being judged in the company of strangers as in my experience students with anxiety tend to not socialise a lot with the other students on the course.
Group work and presentations

Three dyslexic students I have also have a side diagnosis of ADHD and that - you know, together that's just a frightening combination - the thought of actually having to get up in front of a class or in front of somebody and present something, the fear of that actually stops them learning anything. You could sit there and explain everything to them, you know, the two times table, they wouldn't take it in.
Group work and documentation

If as part of the module outline it says you will be allocated randomly based on student numbers, that’s what the student is dealing with ... and then we make a plan to overcome that [anxiety of group work]. If that’s not known and on the day s/he says there’s group work and says ‘right, you, you and you. You, you, and you. Panic!’
Course materials

One of my students who has anxiety on his NAR, for his final year exam wanted to find a particular paper that should have been on the lecture notes. The lecturer didn't put the lecture notes up until about two months after he'd given the lecture, despite my student sending him several emails and you think that would reduce anxieties if the lecture notes were always up there when they were supposed to be.
Communications

... generally response time is a massive issue. If you have someone who's extremely anxious and just wants a simple answer and then they have to wait three days for it, it's horrendous.

If you've got a student that's anxious ... they start thinking well they don't like me. And then they start feeling marginalised again.
Suggested solutions

• Non-medical helpers provide a bridge, both between different students, and between students and staff.

• As one NMH suggested: Many psychological issues for students with anxiety - group-work, presentations, suspicious lecturers, etc. - however these are important aspects of current HE practice - so maybe provide specialist support groups/workshops to assist students in dealing with these issues?
References

